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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000892

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STATE FOR NEA/ARP, LONDON FOR TSOU, PARIS FOR ZEYA

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TAGS: [PGOV KU FREEDOM AGENDA NATIONAL ASSEMBLY](#)

SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA - ELECTORAL REFORM PART II OF III:
WHO SUPPORTS AND WHO OPPOSES THE REDUCTION?

REF: A. KUWAIT (PART I)

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 656

[1](#)C. KUWAIT 636 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)D. 05 KUWAIT 5186

Classified By: DCM Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment: This is the second in a series of three cables on electoral reform in Kuwait. A majority of Kuwaitis support reducing the number of electoral districts from the current 25 to 10, or fewer; however, there is still an influential minority opposing the reform. The most vocal opponents of the reform have been members of Parliament's Independent Bloc, a coalition of 18 pro-Government, "service deputy" MPs who are unlikely to be re-elected if the reform is passed. Some also question the Government's support for the reform: despite its public and private support for ten constituencies (refs A and C), many contacts report that several influential ministers and members of the ruling family are loath to adopt a reform that would limit their influence in Parliament. Even MPs supporting the reform could vote against certain proposals that they see as detrimental to their political interests, such as reducing the number of Shi'a representatives. In the end, support for the reform will depend primarily on the particular reduction proposal and the Government's willingness to expend political (and financial) capital to ensure its passage. Even if the reform stalls yet again, the participation of women in the 2007 elections for the first time in Kuwait will more than double the number of voters in each constituency and serve to limit the scope for electoral corruption. End summary and comment.

Liberals and Islamists' Marriage of Convenience

[1](#)2. (SBU) The strongest support for a reduction comes from liberals and Islamists, who see the reform as a critical component of broader political reform in the country and a possible precursor to official Government recognition of political parties. If the reform is passed, it will likely force candidates to campaign on more broad-based platforms to the benefit of established political associations, particularly the Islamists. The recent vote to move up the date for discussing the issue from June 30 to April 17 may indicate how Parliament would vote on an actual proposal: 23 MPs and 10 ministers voted for the earlier date, while only 12 MPs voted against it. (Note: Only 56 out of Parliament's 64 members were present for the vote. End note.) Complicating the issue, however, is that, while in principle many MPs support a reduction, they are likely to oppose proposals they believe will harm their political interests. For example, Shi'a MPs who support the reduction have voiced concern that certain proposals could diminish Shi'a

representation in Parliament. (Note: Shi'a represent approximately 30% of Kuwait's citizens. End note.) Other groups make similar arguments. In any case, support for the reform will depend largely on the specific proposal and its impact on influential political groups.

Just Want to Be an MP

13. (SBU) The largest group opposing the reform is Parliament's Independent Bloc, a coalition of 18 pro-Government, "service deputies": MPs whose political support is based almost exclusively on obtaining Government favors for their constituents. Most of these MPs are unlikely to be re-elected if the reform is passed. There have been recent indications, however, that a split may be emerging in the Independent Bloc over the issue with some members supporting the reform. Vice President of Research at Kuwait University Dr. Jassem Mohammed Karam, who wrote his PhD thesis on Kuwait's electoral system, told Poloff in a March 15 meeting that a number of MPs would "continue to fight to the end to block the reform, unless constituencies were divided their way." One member of the Independent Bloc told Poloff recently that he opposed the reform because he did not want to give up his "right to be an MP."

The Government's Ambiguous Position

14. (C) During a March 4 call to congratulate Minister of Public Works and Housing Bader Al-Humaidi on his re-appointment to the Cabinet, the Ambassador sought his assessment of the prospects for electoral reform. The Minister said he personally favored five constituencies, but

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that he thought the only proposal with a realistic possibility of succeeding was one with ten constituencies. Al-Humaidi discussed the difficulty of deciding the criteria for the creation of the districts, pointing to the possibility of disproportionate representation by more prolific Kuwaiti sectors representing more conservative elements in the society, while the population among the traditional Kuwaiti (and more liberal) families living in the older districts was not keeping up. Thus, he did not favor the creation of districts simply on the basis of dividing up the country by population. After meeting recently with pro-reform MPs, Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammed Al-Sabah reportedly promised the Government would submit its reduction proposal to Parliament well ahead of the April 17 date for discussing the issue. While high-level Government officials, like Al-Humaidi, have expressed their support for electoral reform (refs A and C), many contacts question their sincerity, noting that the reform would limit the Government's influence on Parliament and could prevent legislation the Government supports from being passed.

15. (C) One expert on Kuwait's political system, Dr. Ali Al-Zo'bi, told Poloff March 11 that he supported five constituencies, and would even settle for ten, but doubted either would pass. A sociology professor at Kuwait University, Al-Zo'bi questioned the Government's seriousness in supporting electoral reform, noting that "the Government" wanted to put Dr. Abdullah Al-Maatouq, the Minister of Awqaf and the Minister of Justice, on the ministerial committee reviewing electoral reform. Al-Maatouq's addition would tip the balance of the committee against the reform, he said. According to Al-Zo'bi, other committee members opposing the reform were Shaykh Ahmed Al-Fahd Al-Sabah, the Minister of Energy, and Mohammed Daifallah Sharar, the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of State for National Assembly Affairs, and Minister of State for Cabinet Affairs. He said Minister of Planning Dr. Ma'souma Al-Mubarak and Minister of Information Dr. Anas Al-Rasheed, who also serve on the committee, supported the reduction. Al-Zo'bi did not comment on the leanings of the committee's chairman, Minister of

Justice and Minister of Interior Shaykh Jaber Mubarak Al-Sabah.

¶6. (C) Al-Zo'bi believed the Government would propose ten constituencies gerrymandered in such a way as to give tribal, sectarian, and religious groups the majority in particular constituencies while ignoring demographic consistency. According to Al-Zo'bi, this proposal would also increase the proportion of "urban" MPs in Parliament, which he said were currently under-represented. He speculated voters would have either four or five votes each under this proposal, which would limit vote buying. Overall, though, Al-Zo'bi was pessimistic about the potential for reform, arguing that regardless of which proposal, if any, was adopted the same "bad people" would be elected.

¶7. (U) The final cable in this series assesses the seriousness of the government on the issue of electoral reform.

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